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Cecilia Zamora

Eastern Washington University, czamora2@eagles.ewu.edu

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Chicanos: An Equal Opportunity for Higher Education

Cecilia Zamora

Eastern Washington University

Faculty Mentor: Martín Meráz Garcia, Ph.D.

Author's Notes

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Correspondence concerning this paper should be address to Cecilia Zamora.

Contact: czamora2@eagles.ewu.edu

Abstract

Latinos are the most rapidly growing population group in the United States and now account for the Nation's largest minority group. This creates a significant opportunity to move forward and grow into more than a typical stereotype. This paper will explore ways to ensure that Latinos can advance and work for the jobs that will lead the U.S. into the 21st century. The U.S. Census Bureau states that 17.8% of Latinos in 2016 graduated with a Bachelor's Degree or Higher compared to Whites at 61.3%. The percentage of Latino students graduating from college of higher education is surprisingly low. Latinos have been underrepresented in undergraduate and graduate STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs and not being prepared in K-12 levels according to Schneider and Ownes at the National Research Center for Education Statistics. Although Latino's have the highest dropout rate they also have the highest school enrollment. This is despite the high school drop out rate being dramatically reduced since 2000 from 27.8% to as low as 9.2% in 2015. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016) The rise in school enrollment is also due to Latino's overall population growth in the United States. In this paper I will be using peer review journals and scholarly sources to assess the obstacles Chicanos endure throughout their educational objectives. The goal is to assure Latinos are being provided with the proper tools and access to resources that will allow them an equal opportunity to succeed.

Key Words: Latinx, Discrimination, Education, Barriers, STEM

Undocumented people did not come to the United States to only escape their financial crisis at home but to contribute and build a better life for themselves and for their family. One of the many obstacles Chicanos face while entering the U.S. is discrimination. They are seen as second-class citizens and their hard work is often overlooked. Immigrants that have entered the United States can have little to no formal education, from completing at the middle school level or less due to their economic situation. Needing both the extra income and not having the financial resources to attend school they are forced to work instead. Their parent's low socioeconomic status and limited understanding about the United States educational system is an initial disadvantage for Latino students. Without this knowledge, plus insufficient school resources and a lack of student-teacher relationships, it becomes increasingly challenging to be academically successful.

Latinos have both a surprisingly low graduation rate and college degree completion, resulting in Latinos being the least educated minority group in the United States. (Schneider and Ownes, 2006) Another disadvantage for children who attend public school in the United States is the language barrier. They speak little to no English and on top of studies are required to learn a second language. As if learning English wasn't difficult enough Latino students feel conflicted about their own identity. When it comes to describing their identity they are wary of being too much of one culture and too little of another. This uncomfortable divide can create larger problems within Latino students such as feelings of isolation, anxiety or depression. Due to their ethnicity many barriers have to be overcome in order for Latinos to thrive in the educational system, yet they remain motivated.

The divide or clash between American culture and their parent's culture becomes something Latinos must learn to balance. For example, a few cultural differences could be getting accustomed to eating non-Mexican food at the school lunch cafeteria, having different expectations, traditions and even a difference in sense of humor. Latinos have strong familial ties and their parents expect them to "ser bien educado" which translates from Spanish to English "to be well educated." Not only does this require higher schooling, but also requires certain etiquette. This means to have morals, be properly mannered, obedient and respectful. Stereotypically, Latinas are presumed to get pregnant at an early age and this is seen as dishonorable to their parents. Regardless, with strong family ties comes the importance of loyalty. Latinos are able to count on each other no matter what. They will frequently rely on family members for help and will expect the same in return. Traditions and strong catholic beliefs connect these families even more.

Latinos also have to be careful when they use certain jokes around or towards non-Latino peers. Latinos are aware of their physical appearances and flaws. They will tease each other mercilessly and receive nicknames that stick with them through adulthood. Some examples are being called "gordo" (which translates to fat), narizon (translates to big-nosed), or "pelon" (translates to baldy). These jokes are all good-natured but may now be insensitive or not translate the correct way. They then have to learn to develop a new and culturally acceptable sense of humor to get along with their peers. Ultimately, many changes occur in Latino students as they first experience school in the United States. The language and culture they bring with them to the school coupled with learning a new curriculum may result in misconceptions about Latino students e.g. being illiterate. Because of the language barrier they

have to work harder than others to understand the material. Therefore, compared to native English speakers more effort is required for them to achieve a good score. Teachers, instead of helping, tend to assume and put blame on the parents for the student's performance in school.

Latinos that come from a low socioeconomic status often have difficult backgrounds or childhoods and whether they are close or far from home are likely to stress about family problems. This could be from having to take care of younger siblings while their parents work long shifts or they themselves having to get a job. This only adds additional stress and an increased workload to their already busy school schedule. As well as having to stress about networking and joining clubs or sports. Teachers also didn't believe in or care to help increase their students' academic ability. Because of this Latinos were often put into vocational classes rather than academic studies. (PBS, 2013)

Regardless of race or ethnicity every student learns at a difference pace and has different learning styles whether it is visual, auditory or kinesthetic learning. It is important for teachers to understand diversity in order to create a rich classroom experience. In "Faculty-Student Interactions and Chicana PhD Aspirations" by Martha Rivas and Miguel Ceja created a study that focuses on Chicana doctoral student interactions and experiences with faculty. Seventeen Chicanas participated in this study and had to meet three qualifications; the first being an undergraduate student, second being at a master level, and lastly being in the process of applying to a doctoral program. All but one of the participants attended public school, the outlier attending a private religious school. All interviews were audiotaped and indicated that faculty role models played a significant role in encouraging Chicanos and Chicanas to pursue a higher education such as a doctoral degree. Nancy (one of the Chicanas participating in the

study) stated that white faculty discouraged her from pursuing graduate school. (Rivas and Ceja 89) Many of the other Chicanas felt the same way about white faculty and were unable to connect with them because the faculty couldn't "relate or understand their experiences as a faculty of color would". (Rivas and Ceja 90) The faculty of color, especially the women, gave positive advice and access to more information and resources that gave the girls a sense of empowerment.

In the documentary, "Pride and Prejudice," Sal Castro encouraged the Latino students to believe in a better future. (PBS, 2013) Castro was a teacher at East Los Angeles high school and always gave his support to Chicano students to strive to advance their education. He made students feel empowered enough to change the school system and fight for an equal education. In March 6, 1968 students from other high schools gathered to go on strike and coordinate a peaceful walkout. Despite the walkout causing police to use force and beat students at Roosevelt High School, students, parents, and the community continued to resist. They continued their walk out for 2 more weeks, resulting in them finally being heard. Their demands were approved and they were able to receive equal education and an increase in Latino/a teachers and superintendents. The walkouts demonstrated how much Latino parents and students value education. If parents aren't able to communicate with teachers on behalf of their child it is that much more important that the school system change so that teachers and parents can do so and help students learn efficiently.

It is necessary, since Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic group in the nation, for Latinos to enter STEM fields for the future economic well being of the United States. Science and technology are everywhere and increasingly growing fields. Studying science improves our

critical thinking skills when asking questions, observing, and exploring ways to test or prove if a hypothesis is correct or wrong. We also now live in a technological society that is progressing rapidly and will grow to new heights within our lifetime. Both engineering and mathematics play a huge role in our everyday lives whether it is in constructing and designing buildings or even taking measurements to bake cookies. This makes it important for STEM subjects to be properly shown to Latino students so they can pursue exciting careers to help create and improve the future of current and future generations. Demand for students and professionals in STEM fields are only going to grow over time. However, Latinos are highly underrepresented in these subjects. Latino students who did earn bachelor degrees primarily graduated with majors in social sciences, business, psychology and education. (Crisp and Nora, 2012) They are more likely to earn degrees in education than engineering or other science related majors.

It is very important for educators to introduce and thus increase interest about STEM careers during K-12 grade levels by giving students information about all the STEM subjects available to them. Too often students question the curriculum because they won't use it in real life but if they are shown these earlier in school they'll be able to relate it to "real life" situations or problems. The number of science, mathematics, and English courses taken in high school affect the decision of choosing a STEM major in college. (Crisp and Nora, 2012) Unfortunately, Latino students are affected by inexperienced teachers in underfunded schools because of their socioeconomic status. For this reason, Latino students are less likely to access high-quality math instruction that further suppresses an interest in mathematics or science. Research shows that "forty-four percent of math courses in high poverty level schools were

taught by teachers without any mathematics certifications” (Crisp and Nora, 2012) This makes it difficult for Latino students to feel confident in attaining a STEM degree.

A couple changes that could be done to correct Latinos education in STEM subjects is to hire more qualified educators to teach in low poverty schools. This will increase the amount of Latino students to pursue a career in a STEM subject. Latino students that have an interest in a science major will usually hesitate and not pursue a science course because they feel uncertain that they will be able to graduate. It is essential to offer encouragement and resources provided by faculty so that Latinos can follow and remain in a STEM career they most likely originally wanted to pursue. Latinos do not lack the motivation however, the reinforcement to keep on working hard and reaching for their goals by any form of support or mentor creates a much larger drive. We must ensure that math, science, technology and engineering subjects start as early as possible so that a career choice can sooner be formed. Leaving it important for these subjects to carry on through their school education. With proper resources and extra motivation from faculty, Latinos will be able to graduate from higher education at larger rates. The Latino population only continues to grow and their education will make a greater impact to the United States and the economy as a whole. The ultimate goal is to create an equal opportunity for Latinos to succeed. To do this, schools must act and make a change now.

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